

GOING PUBLIC: CONSERVATION OF CONTEMPORARY ARTWORKS BETWEEN BACKSTAGE AND FRONTSTAGE IN CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUMS

VIVIAN VAN SAAZE
Postdoctoral researcher
Maastricht University
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Department of Literature and Art

The next time you marvel – admiringly or not – at some oddity of contemporary art in a museum collection, know that it has probably passed through a cross fire of conversation among art professionals unheard by the public.

Kenneth Baker, San Francisco Chronicle

Introduction

In history of art, museum studies *and* the museum gallery, what happens behind the scenes of museums in terms of contemporary art conservation practices stays relatively unseen and unspoken about. Generally speaking, only the outcomes of conservation discussions are sometimes – if at all – explicitly communicated to a larger public. Although understandable from the perspective of the history of museums and conservation – in the light of installation artworks and current developments in contemporary art conservation – a different approach seems appropriate as practices behind the scenes play an important role in the perpetuation of much contemporary art. This article explores recent developments in the conservation of installation artworks and suggests that, to avoid a reductive reading of installation artworks these backstage activities need to be acknowledged in art historical readings as well as museum displays. What happens behind the scenes in terms of conservation and decision-making has, in several ways, important consequences for the perpetuation and understanding of these artworks in a museum context. Through the discussion on conservation of installation art the article tries to demonstrate how installation artworks defy the museum to open up the spaces and practices behind the scenes of display.

Backstage and Frontstage in Museums

In museums, like in other production houses such as laboratories, daily practices involved with 'the making of' are mostly considered irrelevant to the public's eye and stay *sub rosa*. The museum has a long history of maintaining authority by manufacturing certainty, presenting itself as well-structured, employing rational methods while concealing the messier, more contested part of behind the scenes practices. In this light, the museum can be characterised as being two-faced: a confident face that is directed outwards, and a less confident face that is directed inwards. The latter face dominates the process that evolves prior to each display but is hardly made visible to outsiders.

From this perspective, museum practices of presentation and conservation can be understood in terms of Erving Goffman's distinction between 'front region' (or frontstage) and 'back region' (or backstage).¹ In his seminal *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1973, first published in 1959), Goffman develops a dramaturgical perspective in which social interaction is analyzed in terms of theatrical performance. In Goffman's terminology, 'front region' actions are visible to the audience and are part of the performance. 'Back region' is applicable to the activities and behaviors of people when there is no audience present. Goffman:

Since the vital secrets of a show are visible backstage and since performers behave out of character while there, it is natural to expect that the passage from the front region to the back region will be kept closed to audience or that the entire back region will be kept hidden from them. (Goffman 1973: 113)

In studying arts, generally speaking, what is dismissed as mundane and irrelevant (e.g. the realm of backstage practices) is deliberately detached from what is thought to really matter; theory, discourse, content and meaning. Front / back, theory / practice, text / context, content / practicalities, meaning / matter are treated as dichotomies; clearly separated from each other. It can be argued that, as a consequence of these persistent dichotomies, back region activities in museums such as conservation practices have long been deliberately concealed from the public eye. Moreover, the long history of conservation controversies demonstrates that conservation activities can be considered to be high-risk activities: they can lead to heated public debates, devaluation of monetary and felt value of artworks, and even to the expulsion from their profession of people held responsible for supposed mistakes. Needless to say, the fear for harmful rumors, controversies, scandals, loss of reputation and lawsuits may also encourage the strand of concealment and secrecy in conservation and reiterates the tendency to keep such activities and information behind closed doors. Another clarification for the persistent dichotomy between frontstage (presentation) and backstage (conservation and collection management) can be found in the politics of the museum and the per-

¹ I employ Muñoz Viñas' (2005: 15) broad use of the term conservation as the sum of conservation activities including preservation (the activity that avoids alterations of something over time) and restoration.



FIG. 1 – Contemporary art conservator Evelyne Snijders at work on *Papille*, part of the installation *Clamp* (1995) by Franz West (1947) during the exhibition 'Inside Installations', Kröller-Müller Museum. Dimensions: variable. Collection: Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands. Photo: Sanneke Stigter/KMM, 2006.

² The staging of conservation activities can be placed within a more general trend of increasing attention for 'behind the scenes views' of museums. Popular broadcastings are for instance BBC's documentaries: 'The Museum' behind the scenes at the British Museum, and 'Museum of Life' giving the viewers an inside look at the Natural History Museum in London. 'Behind the Scenes of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History' is a Pod-cast series of similar fashion.

³ On view from September 21, 2002, through January 5, 2003.

⁴ The exhibition was on view from December 18, 2008, through June 1, 2009. The Getty website provides a thorough documentation of the exhibition including detailed information on several restorations. http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/fragment_to_vase/, accessed March 2010.



FIG. 2 - *1984 and beyond* (2005-2007) by Gerard Byrne (1969). Video-installation. Dimensions: variable. Collection: Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands. Photo: Cary Markerink.

sisting stereotyping of the conservation profession. Traditionally, and perhaps as a consequence of the dominance of the hands-off dictum, the profession has been burdened with a relentless image of the conservator as a passive custodian wearing white gloves and a white laboratory coat, tucked away in a conservation studio somewhere at the back of the museum. In its focus on the care for the material object, conservation, it has been argued 'can end up as an expensive nuisance in the eyes of those trying to create exhibitions, run excavations, open museums etc.' (Caple 2000: 183).

However, if we take a look at museum display of traditional art, we see an increase of interest in behind the scenes activities of museums in general and conservation activities in particular.² Especially painting restoration is increasingly becoming a topic considered worthwhile of gallery presentations. Without intending to be complete, it is useful to briefly mention some of these exhibitions. An example is Princeton University Art Museum's exhibition 'Beyond the Visible: A Conservator's Perspective' which was devoted to the conservation of nine old master paintings from the museum collection.³ Another, more recent, example is the extensive exhibition 'Fragment to Vase: Approaches to Ceramic Restoration' at the Getty Villa in 2009. In the accompanying brochure it reads: 'this exhibition explores historical and contemporary approaches to the restoration of classical vases and provides a behind-the-scenes look at how fragmentary vessels are reconstructed at the Getty Villa to reveal their original forms and painted designs.' For the conservators of the Getty Villa, it was quite a novelty to prepare for an exhibition and to take on related tasks which are usually assigned to the curatorial staff.⁴

In these examples of conservation display, the act of conservation and restoration is depicted as an exhibition theme. In such thematic exhibits the art objects on display

mainly function as illustrations to a broader narrative on, for example, the profession of restoration or scientific methodologies. The general aim of these exhibitions is to raise public awareness of restoration activities. Yet, it is also no longer uncommon for museums to provide some information on conservation treatment and technical research, for example on a display nearby the actual exhibit or through multimedia tours. In this type of presentation, the art object remains central and information on its (conservation) history and subsequent treatments are considered to be background educational information aiming to enhance the museum experience.

Besides such staging in actual museum contexts, the topic of art conservation is also subject to other kinds of (media) attention outside of the museum walls. Especially internet is increasingly regarded as a compelling site to communicate about behind the scenes practices of conservation. A recent initiative, for example, is a public education website containing 100 conservation science stories 'to increase knowledge of art conservation science among non-specialists, and improve attitudes towards the sciences among students and the general public.'⁵

These examples show that several legitimating reasons are addressed for making conservation accessible to a larger public: conservation is used to serve as a bridge between the arts and the sciences or displaying conservation is for example believed to increase public awareness for art historical and technical research. Whatever the reasons are, in general the profession of conservation is believed to arouse the public's curiosity and thus attract more visitors. The online journal *CEROART* goes so far

⁵ Centre of Interdisciplinary Science for Art, Architecture and Archaeology at University of California San Diego. <http://cisa3.calit2.net>, accessed April 2010.



FIG. 3 - *25 Caramboles and Variations. A Birthday Present for a 25 Year Old (1979)* by Miguel-Ángel Cárdenas (1934). Video-installation. Dimensions: variable. Installed for the exhibition '30 years of Dutch Video-art', Netherlands Media Art Institute (NIMk). Collection Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Photo: NIMk, 2003.

⁶ See the announcement to the special issue on 'restoration on the stage and behind the scenes' of *CEROART*, issue 5, spring 2010. <http://ceroart.revues.org/>, accessed March 2010.

as to describe the current heightened public attention for conservation activities as 'a spectacularisation of the profession which is being mediatised, filmed, televised, podcast; it headlines magazines and programmes with a wide audience base, and has been accorded a specific type of prestige.'⁶

Of course, the effects of display will highly depend on the way conservation is displayed. In a recent article on the emergence of conservation exhibitions, Annlinn Kruger distinguishes at least two strategies: whether a conserved work appears as a player (a work of such significance that it causes the act of its conservation to be staged) or a prop (of only incidental significance to staging acts of conservation) (Kruger 2010: 4).

Although the public familiarisation of conservation is sometimes met with scepticism, for museum educators, curators and conservators, these developments raise many interesting questions such as: to what extent should conservation information be considered as an integrated part of exhibition discourse? How does conservation information in the gallery influence the artwork's experience and how to convey expert knowledge to a lay-audience? Perhaps one of the most important challenges of making conservation accessible to a larger audience lies in a meaningful bridging of backstage and frontstage.

In the following section I will argue that dissolving the boundaries between conservation (backstage) and presentation (frontstage) is inherent to the accessioning of installation artworks into museum collections. Also, I will suggest that recognition of the blurring of boundaries between backstage and frontstage may provide insightful perspectives on the artworks involved and the museums in which they circulate.



FIG. 4 - *A Virus of Sadness, the Virulence of Loneliness* (1990) by Lydia Schouten (1949). Video-installation. Dimensions: 350 x 600 x 800 cm. Installed at the occasion of a pilot-study into the conservation of installation artworks, Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage (ICN). Collection: ICN, The Netherlands. Photo: Tim Koster/ICN, 2002.



FIG. 5 - *A Virus of Sadness, the Virulence of Loneliness* (1990) (detail) by Lydia Schouten (1949). Video-installation. Dimensions: 350 x 600 x 800 cm. Installed at the occasion of a pilot-study into the conservation of installation artworks, Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage (ICN). Collection: ICN, The Netherlands. Photo: Tim Koster/ICN, 2002.

Towards a Public Face of Conservation of Installation Artworks

Although the topic of conservation of contemporary art has been on the research agenda since the 1990s, and despite a growing body of literature as well as the many conferences on these topics, conservation issues and subsequent museum's interventions are not often seriously addressed outside conservation literature. In general, deliberation processes and conservation treatments take place behind closed doors, cautiously concealing them from the museum public. In contemporary art museums installation artworks are usually presented as fixed and finished artworks, thereby neglecting the sometimes far-reaching physical changes of conservation decisions and successive installation moments. Although this is surprising considering installation's paradoxical intertwinement with the contemporary art museum, it does show the firmness of the ideological and architectural boundaries between conservation and presentation: between backstage and frontstage.

Despite the relatively low interest in the conservation of contemporary art outside of the conservation field, the last two decades have shown a heightened attention for its public side. However, press articles commenting on conservation of contemporary art show that public attention does not automatically lead to interesting debates on the subject. As soon as 1996, conservator Albert Albano showed himself particularly critical towards the ways conservation of contemporary art was addressed in the press: 'Characteristic of many journalistic critiques is the tendency to incorporate



FIG. 6 - *Draiboek voor de Schatbewaarder* (1996) by Honoré d'O (1961) during the exhibition 'Inside Installations', S.M.A.K., Mixed media, dimensions: variable. Collection: S.M.A.K., Ghent, Belgium. Photo: Dirk Pauwels, 2010.

cynical polemics and undocumented anecdotes. These tales are chosen deliberately to favor those opinions that conform to an a priori theme of the author, which usually highlights the ephemeral physical qualities of an artwork' (Albano 1996: 177). Indeed, many newspaper articles have the tendency to evolve around rare and extreme cases or focus on the amounts of money collectors pay in acquiring perishable contemporary artworks. Recent newspaper articles with headings such as: 'Copy That! Wait, Don't. Whitney Ponders Problem of Replication in Modern Art' (*The New York*



FIG. 7 - *Pilatus Transformator* (1997) by Thomas Hirschhorn (1957) Mixed Media, dimensions: 200 x 385 x 85 cm, Collection Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht, The Netherlands. Photo: Peter Cox.



FIG. 8 - *Pilatus Transformator* (1997) (detail) by Thomas Hirschhorn (1957). Mixed Media, dimensions: 200 x 385 x 85 cm, Collection Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht, The Netherlands. Photo: Peter Cox.

Observer, November 26, 2009) and 'How to Conserve Art That Lives in a Lake' (*The New York Times*, November 17, 2009) underscore Albano's argument and illustrate the need for more serious conveyance of conservation deliberation processes.

Besides in newspaper articles, conservation issues concerning contemporary art have recently also entered the frontstage of museums. Examples of exhibitions dedicated to the topic of contemporary art conservation and related decision-making are for example: 'Seeing Double: Emulation in Theory and Practice' at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York (19.3.-16.5.2004) and various video-art exhibitions such as 'Re-play. Anfänge international Medienkunst', Generali Foundation, Vienna, Austria (5.12-8.6.2000), '40jahrevideokunst.de' at ZKM Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, Germany (3.25-5.21.2006) and 'Reconstruction Swiss Video Art From the 1970s and 1980s' at Museum of Art, Lucerne (15.03-2.5.2008). Whereas these research projects and related exhibitions specifically focused on the challenges of obsolete media-equipment, recent exhibitions emerging from the conservation research projects 'Inside Installations. Preservation and Presentation of Installation Art' (2004-2007) and 'PRACTICS' (2009-2011) are dealing with the conservation of installation art in a more general sense: 'Inside Installations' at the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, The Netherlands (25.10.2006-07.01.2007 and 21.03-03.06.2007), and 'Inside Installations' (05.06-27.03.2011) at S.M.A.K. in Ghent, Belgium.⁷

These exhibitions (often organized by the conservation department of the respective museum) explicitly addressed conservation issues of contemporary art in connection to the results of specific research projects. In that sense these displays can be considered as special projects, somewhat outside of the regular exhibition practice and are also announced as such.

⁷ For more information on these research projects visit www.inside-installations.org and www.icn.nl. See also: Scholte and 't Hoen (2008).



FIG. 9 - Overview solo exhibition 'The Value of Void' by Navid Nuur (1976) in Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany. Photo: Cathleen Schuster and Marcel Dickhage, 2009.

⁸ For a more thorough discussion on the history of the term, see for example: Reiss (1999) and the special issue 'On Installation' of the *Oxford Art Journal* (Vol. 24, Issue 2, 2001).

Besides the more general goal of attracting visitors and enhancing public awareness for conservation activities, this recent tendency towards creating a public face of conservation of installation artworks could also be understood as a prerequisite of installation practices. In order to raise this point, I will first elaborate on the history of installation art and its entangled relation with the museum.

Installation Art: on the blurring of backstage and frontstage

As mentioned above, installation art has a paradoxical intertwinement with the contemporary art museum. Installation art has a long history and can be placed in the tradition of art movements such as action painting, dada, fluxus, minimalism, performance and conceptual art – movements which emphasise art as a process instead of the *object-fini*, and dethrone the autonomous and object-oriented character of art. Although the term 'installation art' is much contested and as such not easily defined, the term is nowadays generally used to describe works from the 1960s and onwards which share certain key characteristics such as: the creation of an event, site-specificity, the focus on the theatrical, on process, spectatorship and temporality.⁸ With the insight that the context in which an artwork is presented influences the experience and meaning of the work, the term 'installation' first became used in the 1970s. At first, the term was used in the context of exhibition displays. Art historian Julie Reiss (1999) describes how, in the 1970s, the verb 'to install' was used to describe a working process that freed itself from the artist's studio and aimed for direct contact with the audience. The term 'installation art' was used in the context of an artistic practice that referred to, and criticised, the ideology of the (institutional) context: an art practice that appropriated the medium of exhibition but also tried to change it (Baetschmann 1998). Ephemeral and site-specific work became a strategy to break away from commercial mechanisms and temporality and site-specificity were regarded as signs of a critical attitude. Such works were aimed at escaping the boundaries of institutions and the pressure of the art market.

Despite this critical attitude towards museums, in the late 1980s contemporary art was brought into the centre of museum activities and museums started to acquire installations for their collections. Although marginal at first, today installation-based art has become mainstream in contemporary art museums worldwide. However, due to their conceptual, unstable, variable or process-like character, installation-based artworks challenge the conventional object-oriented approach to collecting and conservation. Unlike with more traditional works of art, curators and conservators have to deal with reinstallation, obsolete technologies, ephemeral materials and other problems concerning the care and management of installation artworks. While traditionally, art conservation's aim is defined as being faithful to the work's origi-



FIG. 10 - 'Untitled' (2008-2009) (detail) by Navid Nuur (1976). Installation during the solo exhibition 'The Value of Void', Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany. Courtesy: Galeria PLAN B, Berlin and Martin van Zomeren, Amsterdam. Photo: Cathleen Schuster and Marcel Dickhage, 2009.

nal material condition and to intercept change, installation artworks upset the underlying values and principles of fine art conservation and challenge the very heart of the museum as a collector of fixed material objects.

Arguably, one of the most significant recent developments in conservation theory and practice is the gradual acceptance of acknowledging change as an inherent characteristic of installation art. Allowing notions of variability and change into its conceptual framework has far reaching consequences for the notion of art as a 'fixed' material object as well as the role of museum professionals in reinstallation and the continuation of installation artworks within the museum context. In conservation theory and practice, it is increasingly acknowledged and accepted that contemporary artworks, and especially installation artworks, often require some kind of intervention by the museum to enable their continued display (Depocas 2003; Wharton 2005 and 2009; Laurenson 2006). As a result of re-installation, replacement of obsolete equipment, reconstruction, or other interventions, such works may alter in appearance when they are reinstalled in a different space and time context. Although some installations remain the same in successive iterations, others may change considerably. Needless to say, these alterations may have an effect on the meanings attributed to the artwork. How much can a work of art change before it becomes something else? A similar question was already addressed in one of the first articles about the conservation challenges of installation art by the head of conservation at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, Carol Stringari:

'The ambiguity of the artist may be reflected when the institution who purchased the piece attempts to contact the artist during a reinstallation and the artist wishes to conceive the work differently. This is not necessarily a problem, but if one of the museum's goals is to preserve the integrity of the work it owns the question arises: can such works be mutable, or will each new conception be a new acquisition? What exactly, then, is being purchased when a museum acquires an installation?' (Stringari 1999: 273)

At present, the variability of installation art in terms of their physical constitution, is increasingly recognized as an inherent condition for their perpetuation in a museum context. The conservator of contemporary art is then to decide which changes are acceptable and which are not. Commonly these decisions-making processes take the form of a negotiation between the artist, the conservator and the curator. In the light of these developments, presentation and conservation of installation art is increasingly understood as encompassing a performative element: rather than the commonly accepted hands-off and minimal interventional approach of conservation of more traditional art forms, the perpetuation of installations asks for a more active and engaged approach from their caretakers.⁹

Some artists such as the Belgian artist Joëlle Tuerlinckx (b. Brussels, 1958) explicitly address the topic of perpetuation in their work. In *Ensemble autour de MUR* (1998) in

⁹ Depocas et al. 2003; Wharton 2005; Irvin 2006; Laurenson 2006, van de Vall et al. 2009, van Saaze 2009.



FIG. 11 - Navid Nuur, 'THRESHOLDER (ash pillar II)' (2007-2010). Dimensions: 75 x 20 x 205 cm. Collection: Vehbi Koç Foundation, Contemporary Art Collection Istanbul, Turkey. Photo: Navid Nuur.

¹⁰ *Ensemble autour de MUR* was a case study in the research project Inside Installations. Preservation and Presentation of Installation Art. The work is exhibited in the collection exhibition 'Inside Installations' at S.M.A.K. which is on show from 05.06–27.03.2011. The exhibition addresses the conservation challenges posed by installation artworks and also includes a documentation room in which various aspects of conservation and collection management are made accessible.

¹¹ On show from 16.01–02.05.2010.

¹² Among others, though still exceptional, art historian Martha Buskirk (2003), philosopher Sherri Irvin (2005, 2006), and sociologist Albena Yaneva (2003ab) have explicitly addressed conservation and reinstallation work in their writings on installation artwork. Departing from different angles, they each explore the blurring of boundaries between backstage and frontstage in the context of installation art and arrive at insightful perspectives on the shaping of installations within a museum setting.

the collection of S.M.A.K., Ghent (Belgium), the passing of time and the variability of this ensemble is part of the conceptual framework and is manifested in the design of five different scenarios for installing her work. These different modes of installing the work were realised and documented in close cooperation between the artist and the museum staff in order for the museum to be able to reinstall the work in the future.¹⁰ In her article 'On the Move', art historian Deborah Cherry describes the different instances of Tracey Emin's seminal *My Bed* (1998 to 1999) as it travelled from London to Tokyo and back again, re-routed through New York. While some items remain consistent, the repertory of objects changed according to its exhibition locations. A comparison of the successive installations shows that the physical constitution of this work is far from fixed, leading the author to question whether *My Bed* is 'a singular piece solely comprised of the bed and its immediate objects or (...) is it constituted by its exhibition location, the assemblage taking part in the installations which include other artworks with which it interacts?' (Cherry 2002: 141).

In some cases artist's production is being extended even after the death of the artist. Recently, this was acknowledged in the retrospective 'Felix Gonzales-Torres Specific Objects without Specific Form' at Wiels, Brussels (Belgium).¹¹ The retrospective showed two different exhibitions of works by the American artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres (Cuba 1957–1996). The first exhibition was installed by Elena Filipovic, and later reinstalled by artist Danh Vo. Not only did the retrospective show Gonzales-Torres' works, by staging two different versions of the exhibition also a glimpse into exhibition and conservation practices related to such unstable and variable installation artworks, was provided. In the museum brochure it reads: 'By offering two radically different versions of an exhibition devoted to Gonzalez-Torres' iconic artworks, this retrospective insists that there is no correct, absolute, or singular way to present the oeuvre of an artist like Gonzalez-Torres whose entire practice insisted on both the fragility of the artwork and the questioning of authorities of all kinds.'

What these examples illustrate is that for many installation artworks, no clear line can be drawn between artwork and exhibition or museum practice as they shape each other. As the examples above show, keeping these practices backstage does not seem to be an option for such installation artworks as re-installation and events and decisions taken behind the scenes often have far-reaching consequences for the artworks' constitution. In other words: backstage activities such as collection management and conservation often have a tremendous impact on how an installation is displayed frontstage. Addressing these activities and providing insight into the backstage practices of museum work, is a prerequisite for understanding installation art as it provides insight into artistic practices, the working practices of museums and the multiple strategies employed to ensure the continuation of these works.

Considering the strong impact conservation activities have on installation artworks in museum collections it is surprising that these practices, few exceptions aside, are hardly explored outside the conservation field.¹² Generally speaking, in art history writings, the installation artwork is considered as having a single paramount condi-

tion, thereby neglecting the changes an installation may have undergone over time and overlooking the different iterations or re-installations of the work. Even most installation art anthologies employ such a reductive approach and hardly take the variability of many of these artworks into account. If addressed at all, conservation practices are often set aside as merely practicalities. Just as art historical readings of installation art rarely report on negotiations and discussions that go on behind the scenes, also museum studies rarely address these backstage practices. Sociologist Albena Yaneva (2003ab) and others have observed that museum studies also commonly place emphasis on the front end of the museum and maintain a strict division between what happens in front of and behind the scenes. Concrete practices and day-to-day work are rarely at the centre of museum studies.

Yet, as this article suggests especially with installation artworks, it is of great importance to study these practices as installations cannot be understood separately from the museum practices in which they become. With installation artworks, interrelations between the work of art and museum context become so obviously intertwined that they can not be detached from each other without doing injustice to the practice of installation artworks. In order to encountering reductive reading of installation artworks, these processes need to be reframed as part of artistic prac-

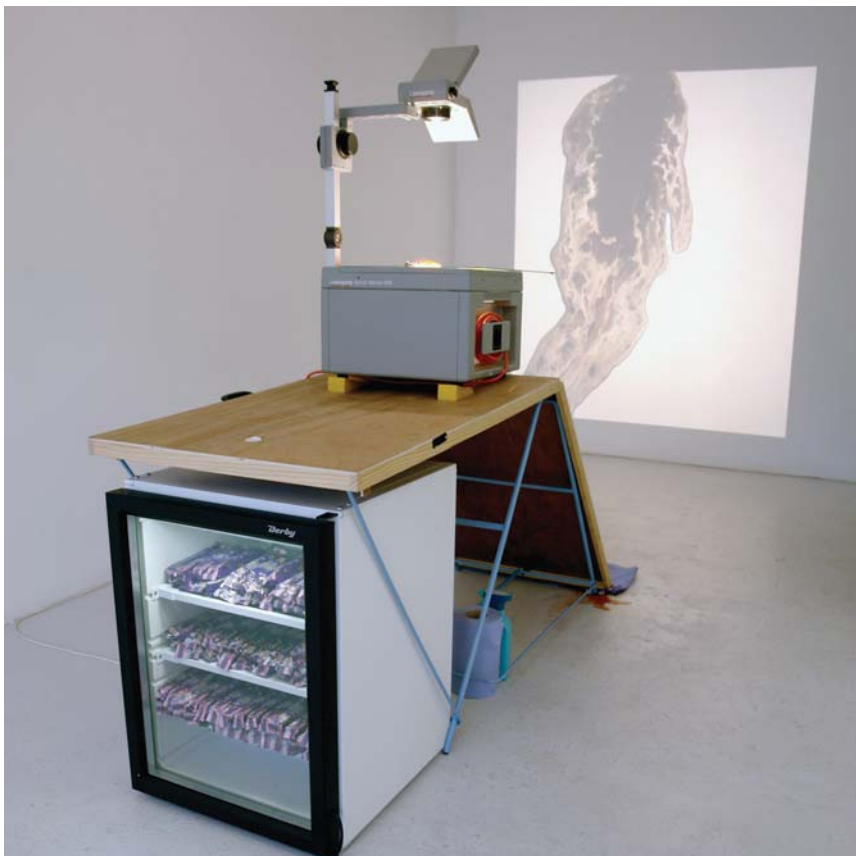


FIG. 12 - Navid Nuur, 'VEIN OF VENUS' (2008-2009). Materials: overhead projector, ice cream, fridge, paper, Glassex, folding-table. Dimensions: variable. Installation at Gallery Martin van Zomeren, Amsterdam. Collection: S.M.A.K., Ghent, Belgium. Photo: Navid Nuur.

¹³ See also Van Saaze (2009). The question of how ethnographic writings could foster more openness and discussion in conservation as well as stimulate public awareness is also addressed in the research and activities of the research group New Strategies in the Conservation of Contemporary Art. www.newstrategiesinconservation.org.

¹⁴ 'Competing Commitments: A Discussion about Ethical Dilemmas in the Conservation of Modern and Contemporary Art.' Newsletter from the Getty Conservation Institute 24.2, Fall 2009: http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications/newsletters/24_2/dialogue.html, accessed March 2010.

tices. Rather than isolated and marginalised, these processes should be considered integral to artistic practices.

Elsewhere, I have argued that in terms of studying conservation practices of contemporary art and the merging of back- and frontstage, anthropological writing on art works may provide a useful analytical model.¹³ Such research starts from the premises that things are not 'things in and of themselves', but are constructed in practices. Artworks in the museum seem autonomous, but their continued existence is the result of a lot of work and effort. To speak with the words of sociologist Howard Becker: art is not the product of an individual, but 'the product of a collective work, the work that all these different people do, which, organized in one way or another, produces the result that is eventually taken to be the artwork itself' (Becker et al. 2006:3). In terms of installation art, an interesting line of research for example would be to analyse the demarcation work of museums by exploring the passages between backstage to frontstage and the difficulties of persisting on this distinction. By studying what happens in art conservation practices from an empirical approach, empirical informed research in contemporary art museums adds to our understanding of installation artworks and the institute museum. Moreover, incorporating such empirical research on day-to-day museum work into art historical research could also play a fruitful role in the enhancement of the public awareness of conservation issues and backstage museum practices.

Considering the substantial impact of conservation activities for the contemporary art, it is even more surprising that the conservation of contemporary art has up till recently – and besides some dedicated projects –deserved so little attention in the gallery space. Initiatives of communicating conservation issues within the museum gallery have up till now mainly sprung from the conservation community. However, a certain change in attitude is apparent as the blurring of boundaries between presentation and conservation is reflected in emerging collaboration models between curators, conservators and educators. Jill Sterrett, Director of Collections and Conservation at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, observes:

'I'm extremely inspired by the way conservation efforts can and should connect with many other departments in the museum – how conservation can link with education efforts and how scholarship in the field is actually interesting to the general public. The motivations of an education department and a conservation department don't have to be viewed as independent. The same can be said of our curatorial colleagues. We're all noticing that these boundaries are not so hard and fast anymore.'¹⁴

Conclusion

In this article I have particularly focused on museum practice, encouraging a public face of conservation and hinting towards the role empirical research could

play in this development. Besides raising awareness on the issues connected to conservation and presentation of installation art, the article also explores how, triggered by the changes in artistic practice, related working practices of contemporary art conservators are increasingly made more visible and transparent to a diversity of audiences. Conservation of contemporary art has come a long way since the early 1990s, however there still seems much to gain in terms of a more general public awareness of this field. Although the topic of contemporary art conservation is nowadays increasingly addressed in exhibitions, until recently, not much attention was directed towards the inherent impact of museum intervention caused by matters of presentation and conservation. However, considering the impact of museum intervention on the display and perpetuation of installation artworks, museums are encouraged to be more communicative about the strategies they employ to deal with the tension between deciding on an artworks identity *and* allowing for its variability. This leads to a new set of questions such as: Whose task is it to engage conservation into a more public repertoire: curators, conservators, educators, artists, art historians, social scientists and what kind of medium should be used to open up these practices to different audiences: exhibitions, films, book, articles, documentation, podcasts in museums – or perhaps a multitude of media? Explorations in this area have just begun. In any event, they will change our understanding of the museum and enrich our understanding of installation artworks. •

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my colleagues from the research group New Strategies in the Conservation of Contemporary Art: Renée van de Vall, Deborah Cherry, Tatja Scholte, IJsbrand Hummelen, Sanneke Stiger and Hanna Hölling for their helpful comments.

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